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Fashion entrepreneurship among college students: Exploring the motivations and skills to become a fashion entrepreneur

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Background: The unemployment rate among college graduates has been increasing exponentially since the downturn of the economy in 2008. A study conducted by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, found that only 53% of the recent college graduates studied were employed full time (Godofsky, Zukin, & Van Horn, 2011). Especially, with traditional retailing and fashion industries facing more challenges, it is even harder for fashion majors to locate a satisfied employment position. Furthermore, average pay for a newly hired graduate decreased from \$30,000 in 2007 to \$27,000 in 2010 (Godofsky, et al., 2011). Many college graduates have found entrepreneurship to be a more lucrative career path than working for someone else, and turned to entrepreneurship as an answer. In fact, the majority of new ventures started in fashion and retailing sectors are Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs). These businesses create 65 percent of the net new jobs in the United States, and makes up over 99% of all employers, and they employ about 50% of all private sector workers (Longley, 2013). When one is deemed unemployable by prospective employers, creating a business may be the best alternative not only for one's self but also for communities and societies.

Although there has been a noted increase in the population of fashion entrepreneurs, many emerging entrepreneurs are still struggling in every stage of starting and growing their businesses. Still, many newly graduated college students may not be able to pursue this endeavor because of the challenges and obstacles inherent in such an entrepreneurship journey. With a failure rate of 50% for new small businesses, emerging fashion entrepreneurs must be provided necessary support and incubation services to survive in a highly competitive market. Training and support services may help to increase one's desire and ability to pursue entrepreneurship (Garavan & O'Cinneide, 1994). Therefore, there is a critical need to identify the motivations, skills and assistances expected to start and operate fashion business so that better business incubation service and support can be provided effectively.

The identified gaps in the extant literature limit our understanding of entrepreneurs' beliefs and confidence in their capabilities to become successful. Given the importance of entrepreneurship as a source of employment and for economic development, the purpose of this study is try to fill identified gaps. We specifically focus on exploring the motivations, internal and external factors for graduated college students to start an entrepreneurship journey, and identifying what support or resources are needed to facilitate success.

Method: An online open-ended questionnaire was designed for collecting empirical data. College students in a large university were recruited with extra course credit as incentives. Participants were first asked whether or not they have considered being a fashion entrepreneur in the future. Next, respondents were asked to explain the motivations why they want to be a fashion entrepreneur and to explain the internal and external factors influencing their decisions. Finally, respondents were asked to identify the skills they think are needed for being a fashion entrepreneur and the supports they may need. The survey link was sent to 134 students enrolled

in three fashion merchandising classes. In total, 76 usable responses were included for the final empirical analysis. The majority of respondents were female juniors or seniors. Data were sorted and input into the NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software for further coding. An experienced researcher first coded the data into different nodes. The researchers then worked together to refine the sub-category themes. Finally, the codes were aggregated into overarching themes.

Findings: Empirical study explored the motivations (95 references) to start a fashion business, internal (23 references) and external (70 references) factors considered, and the supports needed (66 references) when students plan to start a business. *Having more freedom* (43.4%) and *sense of achievement* (36.8%) were the top two motivations. Being their own boss would allow them to have more freedom to cultivate their creativity and to be more independent. Some students mentioned that they would want to have their own fashion business because they are very *interested in fashion* (35.5%), and being an entrepreneur is an approach to *make money* (9.2%). Further, participants were asked the internal and external factors they would consider when they plan to start the fashion business. *Time management skills* (10.5%), *financial knowledge* (7.9 %) and *creativity skills* (6.6%) were the three major internal factors that participants think may have an influence on their success. In addition, when they were asked about the external factors related to starting and running a fashion business, *funding* (47.4%) and *location* (27.6%) were the top two factors considered. Participants also mentioned that having effective *marketing strategy* (10.5%) and finding a *source of merchandise* (6.6%) are the other factors they believe will have an influence on their entrepreneurship success. Not knowing how to start the business made participants believe that receiving assistance on creating practical *business plan* (35.6%) would be beneficial. Additionally, training in *financial management* (17.1%) and assist on getting more *business contacts* to build social networks (17.1%) were additional desired supports to succeed in starting and running businesses. Finally, guidance in *searching for funding* (15.8%) and to get start-up loans was also pointed out by some participants.

Discussion: This study finds out the motivations for college students to start their own fashion business and identifies both internal and external factors affecting fashion entrepreneurship success. It also indicates the specific supports and assistance preferred by college students who want to start fashion businesses. The findings provide a direction for educational and marketing initiatives to offer better support and incubation services for fashion entrepreneurship cultivation. Providing effective training in developing business plans, practical financial management advisement and offering platforms with the opportunities of building networks and business contacts would prepare entrepreneurs for starting their businesses. In addition, offering assistance in identifying merchandise sourcing tools and fashion marketing strategies would also benefit future fashion entrepreneurs.

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